

May 2015

Behind the Badge

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Recommended Citation

Dodds, Will and Bysted, Korrie (2015) "Behind the Badge," *Ethos*: Vol. 2015 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2015/iss3/3>

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Behind the Badge

Getting pulled over is a two-sided experience

BY WILL DODDS PHOTO KORRIE BYSTED

You're driving down the street, and flashing red and blue lights appear in your rear view mirror. Time to get pulled over, or as the police call it a "traffic stop."

You were probably speeding or forgot to put your headlights on. Thank your personal deity that you haven't had a drink. You sink in your seat—the night just went from great to horrible.

Meanwhile—in the car behind you—someone like ISU Police Officer Anthony Greiter puts on his brights to make sure you're the only one in the car. He turns his tires to the left in case you drive off and he needs to make a getaway.

Then he gets out of his car, uncertain of whether he will survive the encounter.

"We're approaching an unknown vehicle," Greiter says. "We don't know what's inside, we don't know who's inside. It's actually one of the more dangerous things we do in our job."

Being pulled over is a two-person experience, and while most people know what it's like to be pulled over, it's hard for many to understand what police have to go through.



"My goal at the end of every day is to go home—my goal is to go home alive and well," says Greiter.

As fellow ISU Police Officer Keith Varner says, "every traffic stop is different." Sometimes he just pulls someone over and they talk. Other times, he has to chase drivers into the woods. Once, Officer Varner had to chase down someone who ran into the wooded area by the Memorial Union and down into the brook.

"He tries to crawl out of the creek and comes right at me. I pull my taser out, point it at him, and I told him to get the ground," Varner explains. "At first he didn't want to listen to me. Luckily, I was able to talk him out of the creek, up on to some level ground and get him handcuffed."

"Once when a person failed the breathalyzer test, his excuse was he ate an entire bottle of Jack Daniel's BBQ Sauce."

There are areas where there are more accidents than others; police call them "target areas." When a target area is identified, more policemen will be placed there. These places include several intersections on Duff and Lincoln Way.

The Ames Police Department often posts on social media ahead of time as to where police will be. They try to pull people over in a safe and well-lit area so both you and the officer feel comfortable.

When the police approach a car, they look for suspicious actions called "furtive movement" before they reach the car. Things

like looking underneath the seat, going through the glovebox or reaching into the back seat signals to an officer that you may be looking for a gun or hiding drugs.

Other times, it's more innocent.

"The driver was speeding and his wife was pregnant—in labor—and they were were making their way to the hospital," says Greiter. He immediately called an ambulance that made it in time to take them to the hospital, letting them off the hook.

Luckily, Ames isn't a big city with crime running rampant, which allows Ames police to be more personal during a traffic stop. Don't be afraid to ask questions—it's best to understand what is going on.

"It's like when you go to the doctor and don't ask what your symptoms mean," says Varner.

However, don't try and make what Greiter calls "entertaining excuses." Once when a person failed the breathalyzer test, his excuse was he ate an entire bottle of Jack Daniel's BBQ Sauce.

If you do think the police officer is harassing you because of your gender or race, Ames police has a very thorough system of accountability. All traffic stops are video recorded and officers in Ames wear audio recorders as well. It's all archived, and if someone complains to the Ames Police Department, four different high-ranked officers review the audio and video.

Now comes the bad part: getting the ticket or warning citation. A warning citation is just that—a warning. No fines, and your record stays clean. Ames Police gave out a combined 4,761 citations and warning citations in 2014—about 37 percent of them were warning citations.

"My goal when I make a traffic stop is to alter behavior. When I think a behavior is going to be changed with a warning, that's all I need to do," says Greiter.

So you get a verbal warning, the officer says goodnight, and you both drive away safe and sound. You may even want to thank the officer when all is said and done. 🍷

The Ames Police Department allows citizens to go on ride-alongs. During this ride-along an officer pulled over a vehicle for a problem with their taillight.